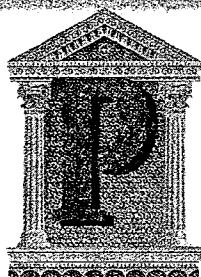


8 Greek Philosophy and Socrates



Philosophy and Adversity People often grow more philosophical during times of adversity. When life is good, it is easy to ignore large questions about the meaning of life. But when times are tough, these questions seem to thrust themselves upon us with increased urgency.

The history of Athens seems to prove the point, for as the Athenian empire collapsed, Athenian philosophy burst into magnificent bloom. During the last years of the Peloponnesian War and the decades that followed, Athens fell on hard times militarily and politically, and yet the city-state was home to a string of brilliant and influential philosophers, including Socrates, Plato (PLAYT oh), and Aristotle (AR his taht ul).

Early Greek Philosophy

Of course, some Greeks had asked philosophical questions before these three philosophers came along. In earlier times they had asked questions such as: How can we understand the world around us? Where did the earth come from? How did the universe get started? Why is life so full of troubles? Like people in other ancient cultures, the Greeks told stories that helped them understand the world. They said that natural events were caused by the gods. A storm at sea meant that the sea god

Poseidon was angry. A thunderstorm meant that Zeus was throwing his thunderbolt spear. The world was full of troubles because Zeus had given the first woman, Pandora, a jar or box, with strict instructions that she not open it. But Pandora's curiosity got the better of her,

Socrates was the most famous Greek philosopher.

and she opened the lid, releasing all the evils and miseries that afflict humanity.

By the sixth century B.C., however, some people were no longer satisfied with the answers given by the myths. Some of them no longer really believed that gods and goddesses were behind natural phenomena. They wondered if there weren't other ways to understand the world. Eventually, some Greeks began to use reason to try to understand the world. This was the beginning of philosophy.

The word *philosophy* means "love of wisdom." A philosopher is a lover of wisdom, a person who uses reason to try to acquire wisdom about life or the universe. Many of the early Greek philosophers tried to figure out where the world came from, how it began, and what it was made of. Some of their ideas have stood the test of time and are still considered important. Other ideas strike us today as strange. But at least the early philosophers were trying to figure things out by using their brains.

The early philosopher Heraclitus (her ah KLITE us) held that everything in life is always changing. It is impossible, Heraclitus said, to step in the same river twice, because the river itself is always flowing and never at rest. This is an idea that still makes sense to us today. But Heraclitus also had some ideas that seem strange to us. For example, he seems to have thought that to live long, it was important to keep one's soul from becoming too wet. At death a dry soul would rise all the way to the sun and help bring about light, day, and summer. But a wet soul would only rise

as far as the moon, where it would help bring about winter, night, and rain.

Another early philosopher, Thales (THAY leez) taught that everything in the universe comes from water. The philosopher Anaximenes (an ak-SIHM uh neez) believed that everything comes from air. Air is alive with movement, he reasoned, and so air must be the origin of all life. Empedocles (em PED uh kleez) had a slightly more complicated theory. He hypothesized that everything comes from the combination or separation of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Some of these theories were little more than guesses. It took a long time before philosophers began to test their ideas through observation. Still, these early philosophers were important because they were attempting to answer difficult questions. They were teaching themselves and their listeners how to reason, instead of just accepting the old myths.

Socrates

One of the most famous of all the Greek philosophers was an Athenian named Socrates, who lived from 469 B.C. to 399 B.C. Socrates grew up during the Golden Age of Athens but lived to see that Golden Age crumble during the Peloponnesian War, in which he fought as a young man. Most of what we know about the philosophical ideas of Socrates comes from the writings of one of his students, named Plato. Socrates himself wrote nothing. Yet, because he was immortalized in the writings of Plato, when we think of Greek philosophy, we always think of Socrates.

Socrates was different from earlier Greek philosophers in several ways. First of all, he was less interested in questions about where the world came from and what it might be made of than he was in questions about how human beings ought to behave. Socrates was one of the first philosophers to study **ethics**.

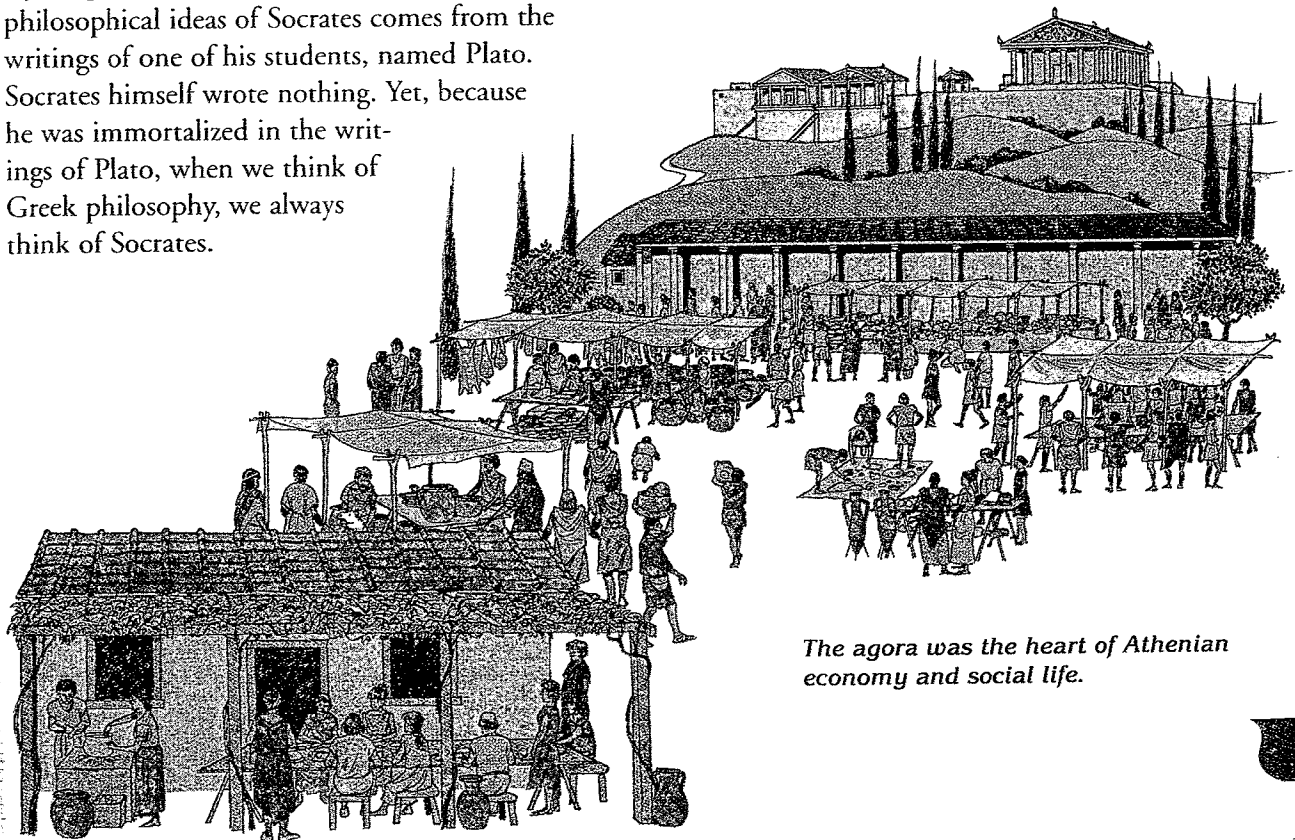
Socrates also had some unusual methods of philosophizing. Instead of just sitting in his room and writing about philosophical questions, he went to the Athenian marketplace, called the *agora*, and talked with other Athenians. In this way, Socrates made philosophy personal.

vocabulary

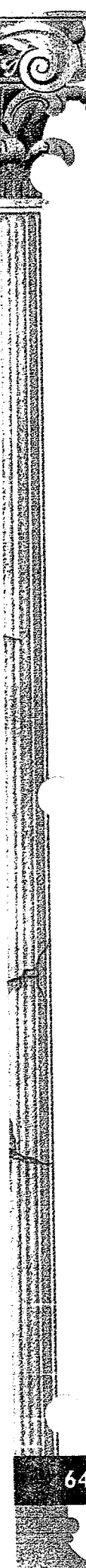
ethics the branch of philosophy that studies what it means to live a good, moral life

During his discussions, Socrates tried to get the Athenians to examine their lives. He wanted them to realize that they were not always living according to the ideals and moral values they said were important. He tried to convince Athenians that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

He tried to get them to understand this by asking them questions, instead of giving direct answers. Socrates would ask his listeners to explain what they meant by



The agora was the heart of Athenian economy and social life.



an important moral concept, such as justice. Then he would point out the contradictions between what they said and how they lived. By doing this, he was not trying to condemn people as hypocrites. He was trying to get people to think more deeply about their lives and about moral and ethical ideals.

The Socratic Method

We can get an idea of what Socrates might have sounded like by looking at an excerpt from Plato's works. In the passage that follows, Socrates is talking with a friend named Crito and making a comparison between physical fitness and moral or ethical fitness:

SOCRATES: Well, is life worth living with a body which is worn out and ruined in health?

CRITO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: What about the part of us which is mutilated by wrong actions and benefited by right ones? Is life worth living with this part ruined? Or do we believe that this part of us, whatever it may be, in which right and wrong operate, is of less importance than the body?

CRITO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Is it really more precious?

CRITO: Much more.

SOCRATES: In that case, my dear fellow, what we ought to consider is not so much what people in general will say about us but how we stand with the expert in right and wrong, the one authority, who represents the actual truth.

We cannot be certain that these are Socrates' exact words. The words were written down later by Plato. But we do know that this was the way Socrates worked, by asking a series of questions that were designed to lead the listeners to realizations about how they ought to behave.

Today, this question-asking method is known as the *Socratic method*. It is still widely used. Whenever your teacher asks you a series of questions, trying to get you to realize something, he or she is using the Socratic method.

Unlike other Greek philosophers, called sophists, Socrates did not get paid for teaching. He did not want money for his ideas. He did not care about personal comforts. Once when he was passing through the marketplace, he remarked, "How many things I can do without!"

Socrates also differed from the teachers of his day by claiming that he did not have wisdom. Then again, he also said he was the wisest man in Athens because he knew he did not have wisdom.

Socrates insisted that he had never taught anyone anything. He simply liked to have conversations. His conversations, however, were always based on two principles. Socrates believed strongly that it was important never to do any wrong, even indirectly. The second principle was that people who really understood what was right and good could not possibly choose the wrong thing.

Although some people liked Socrates, many others found him very annoying. Socrates was constantly talking and expressing his ideas, even when these ideas were unpopular. Socrates also got on peoples' nerves by pointing out their faults. Nobody likes to be reminded of their shortcomings—especially in front of others. Eventually, Socrates was arrested on the charge of corrupting the young men of Athens.

Some of the citizens of Athens felt that Socrates had misled the young men of the city. They accused the philosopher of failing to teach the young proper respect for older people and for the gods and of encouraging them to be selfish and power hungry. Alcibiades had been one of Socrates' favorite students, they said. Other students had been involved in the corrupt government that ruled Athens at the end of the

Peloponnesian War. Some Athenians held Socrates responsible for the way these young men had treated the rest of the citizens of Athens.

The Death of Socrates

Plato wrote a series of works about the last days of Socrates. One of these works describes the trial in which Socrates defended himself but was eventually convicted (by a vote of 280 to 221) and sentenced to death.

Plato also wrote dialogues describing conversations that Socrates had with his friends while he was in prison awaiting death. When someone suggested that there were important people who would help Socrates escape from prison, the philosopher refused to save himself and rejected their help. He argued, "one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice." Socrates refused to break the law, even when it condemned him. The citizens of Athens had condemned him to death, and he would face death because it was the right thing to do. He would not put himself above the law.

Socrates was executed by being made to drink hemlock, a kind of poison. Plato shows Socrates

continuing to converse with his friends after he drinks the hemlock and gradually drifting into death. In reality, the death of Socrates must have been much more gruesome. Hemlock causes not only numbness of the limbs but also choking, slurring of speech, convulsions, and uncontrollable vomiting. Plato does not show this side of Socrates' death, probably because he wanted Socrates to be remembered as an example of reason and self-control right up to the bitter end. He wanted Socrates to be remembered as Plato himself remembered him, as "a man of whom we may say that of all whom we met at that time he was the wisest and most just and best."

Today, Socrates is remembered for the Socratic method and for his commitment to seeking truth. He expanded the role of the philosopher to include the important task of examining how people live their lives. It wasn't enough for Socrates to think about what goodness meant ideally. He wanted people to choose goodness and live rightly every day. That is why his contributions to philosophy are still important to us all these centuries later.

This is a detail from a painting called "The Death of Socrates." It was painted by Jacques-Louis David, a French artist, in the eighteenth century.

